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AUTHOR	Haugh, Rita E.
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ABSTRACT

After the Food and Drug Administration announced the results of testing of saccharin as a possible carcinogen and ruled that it should be banned, a public outcry brought about a delay in the ban. A study of magazine coverage of the reasons for the ban and information about the testing showed that in eleven mass circulation magazines, the reporting of the proposed banning of saccharin and of the controversy that surrounded it was much less complete than should be expected. Coverage did not help the public develop respect for the Canadian tests on which the ban was based or to understand how the tests were done, nor did it explain the danger of saccharin use in terms that made it meaningful or applicable to people's lives. (TJ)

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HAZARDOUS TO YOUR HEALTH:

MAGAZINE COVERAGE OF THE SACCHARIN DEBATE

BY

Rita E. Haugh
Doctoral Student
School of Journalism
Indiana University
Bloomington, Indiana

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Rita E. Haugh

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Hazardous to Your Health:
Magazine Coverage of the Saccharin Debate

On January 6, 1977, Jack Anderson charged the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) of withholding evidence from the American public that saccharin caused cancer, noting that tests were being conducted in Canada.[1] The FDA denied that they were withholding evidence. After Anderson's comments, aired as a 30-second item on NBC's newscast that evening, the American public heard nothing about saccharin for a little more than two months--and then it most decidedly did not like what it heard.

On March 9, 1977, the results of tests using saccharin on rats were released in Canada and in Washington, D.C. The action, taken simultaneously by the FDA and the Canadian counterpart to the FDA, the Health Protection Branch, was the proposed banning of saccharin. For nine months, however, until late in November 1977, the public and government debate continued on the merits and hazards of saccharin. This paper looks at the coverage provided in selected groups of magazines.

Problems of Covering the FDA Announcement

The safety of saccharin had been questioned in studies since 1951, but much of the research was discounted because of ambiguity about the results or questions about the methodology. In 1974 two studies in which rats were exposed to saccharin in their diets from conception until death were completed. In both studies--one by the Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation, one by the FDA--those that received the highest levels of saccharin experienced a significant number of bladder tumors. A review of the evidence by a committee of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) questioned the carcinogenic properties of saccharin, stating that the data had "not established conclusively whether saccharin is or is not carcinogenic when administered orally to test animals."

The Canadian Health Protection Board began a study in 1974 to resolve the uncertainties of the NAS committee review. The FDA had kept current on the study, and three FDA staff members were part of a panel of outside consultants to it. A week before the final evaluation of the project, FDA senior officials agreed that the Canadian study would almost certainly find saccharin a carcinogen. In this case, the FDA should be

ready to announce a ban on the sale of saccharin, they reasoned.

The evaluation panel concluded the study on March 7 and 8, a Monday and Tuesday. The FDA planned a simultaneous announcement with the Canadians on Thursday, March 10. But on Wednesday, March 9, stock prices on companies with dietetic lines went down, apparently because the story of the study was leaked. The Canadians decided to release the information in a press conference on the afternoon of March 9, and they notified the FDA, sharing a press release with them.

In Washington, the FDA had less than two hours to notify reporters of the conference and to prepare materials for it. As it turned out, the shortage of time for preparation created problems for the FDA announcement and subsequent coverage.

March 9 was also the day that a group of Hanafi Muslims seized three buildings and 130 hostages in downtown Washington, D.C. As a result, reporters and television crews were out covering the Hanafis. In addition, because many streets were closed, movement through the city was difficult. So the FDA conference, which generally draws 50 reporters and up to seven television crews, was poorly attended: 15 reporters, no television crews. Thus many reporters based their stories on the handout provided--hastily rewritten and simplified from the Canadian statement--and did not have a chance to question sources.

The Press Release

The press release issued by the FDA said that the ban was based on two factors: "A study sponsored by the Canadian government showed that saccharin, when fed in high doses to rats, caused malignant bladder tumors," and "The so-called 'Delaney Clause' of the Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act prohibits the use in food of any ingredient shown to cause cancer in animals or man." A statement from Sherwin Gardner, acting FDA commissioner, said, "Saccharin has been in use for more than 80 years and has never been known to harm people, and since the Canadian data do not indicate an immediate hazard to public health, we do not consider the recall of existing products to be necessary."

This statement from Gardner and an example from the Canadian release reflect the FDA viewpoint that consumers would panic about the possibility of cancer and demand to know why the FDA had not banned it sooner. The example the Canadians used, so widely quoted in the

American press, was, "The dosages. . .were in excess of the amount that a consumer would receive from drinking 800 twelve-ounce diet sodas daily over a lifetime." Many newspapers, magazines and commentators repeated this statement, using it to ridicule the FDA for its seemingly arbitrary and alarmist behavior.

The release did not mention, however, that high dosages in animal studies are a standard means of testing for events that are rare in the human population, that testing had been continuing for 15 years, and that the allusion to 800 sodas was an attempt to make a concrete comparison that would provide saccharin equal to 5 percent of the body weight of an adult. Recalculating the risk--one diet soda a day increases a person's chance of contracting bladder cancer by 1.54 percent--seems more clear and concise. The FDA release did not emphasize that the Canadian study had conformed to strict, well-accepted scientific methods.

One question answered in the press conference and not addressed in the release received little attention: Would saccharin have been banned even without the Delaney Clause? Answer: Yes, because of a "general safety" requirement that no food additive be approved unless it is shown to be safe. Saccharin had been removed from the GRAS list (Generally Regarded As Safe) in the early 1970s. Thus the press release understated the central issues of the risk of saccharin to humans.

Public Outcry

In any case, the FDA underestimated the size and direction of the reaction of the American public. The protest provided the biggest mail comment to Congress on an issue in at least five years--as many as two-thirds of the letters received during this period mentioned saccharin. The FDA was ridiculed by comments such as, "The Canadians have determined that saccharin is dangerous to your rat's health," from Indiana Congressman Andy Jacobs. Dieters, diabetics and diet food companies were the most vocal in their opposition to the ban. Some groups sought to amend or alter the Delaney Clause. In general, the public perceived the ban as arbitrary and without firm scientific basis.

After action in both the House and Senate to delay the ban while another study was completed, President Carter signed a bill in

November 1977 for a delay until May 23, 1979. A statement from the National Academy of Sciences a year later, in early November 1978, said that saccharin "must be viewed as a potential cause of cancer in humans." This is because saccharin is not only a weak cancer-causing agent itself but because it promotes the cancer-causing activity of other substances. A second report from the Academy, to be finished in spring 1979, will evaluate the food safety policies of the government and make some recommendations about saccharin.

MAGAZINE COVERAGE

The study sought to look at the coverage of the proposed ban on saccharin and its hazards in a variety of consumer magazines in 1977. Science news appears in many consumer magazines. A content analysis of nonfiction articles in nine mass circulation magazines during 1947 and 1957 found that about 4 percent of the 1947 articles and 5 percent of the 1957 articles dealt with some aspect of science.[2] A more comprehensive study of all the articles printed in 205 issues of ten widely circulated magazines in 1963 found increased space devoted to science: an average of 8 percent.[3] Reader's Digest contained 48 science articles in 12 months; Good Housekeeping had 41 articles. While television might initially grab the viewer's attention on a topic, a newspaper or magazine account will fill in details or add information that simply cannot be provided in the time limitations of television. In addition, magazines are read more persistently than any other medium, are less perishable, and are read attentively.[4]

Several different categories of consumer magazines were chosen to provide comparison with each other. The categories were news magazines; intellectual magazines; "working class" magazines; and women's magazines. Although the possibility of overlap in readers between magazines exists, these four were considered different enough to provide interesting comparisons. Also, all magazines chosen were available in the university library.

News magazines: Time, Newsweek, U.S. News and World Report

Intellectual magazines: Atlantic Monthly, Saturday Review, Harpers

"Working class" magazine: Reader's Digest[5]

Women's magazines: McCalls, Ladies' Home Journal, Good Housekeeping, Redbook

News Magazines

The group of magazines providing the best overall coverage was the news magazine--though even that coverage was rather limited: five articles in Newsweek, two articles and two editorials in U.S. News and three articles in Time. All from 1977appeared between March and early July; none reported the congressional deliberations over the delay on the ban or Carter's signing of a bill in November 1977, which led to an 18-month delay on banning saccharin.

Newsweek was the only magazine that ran a sidebar on the tests themselves (March 21, 1977, p. 67). It reported on the Wisconsin tests in 1971, the removal of saccharin from the GRAS list, and the procedures of the Canadian tests. It also tried to explain how the "800 diet sodas a day" comparison was arrived at and why researchers use large doses. The result of a population study of diabetics is reported as evidence that no link between human cancer and saccharin use had been established. One important item stated here and omitted in other magazines was this one: "Shubik (a doctor at the Eppley Institute for Research in Cancer at the University of Nebraska) believes the most important conclusion that can be drawn from the Canadian research is that there might be a risk to the human fetus or very young children, but not to adults." Overall, this is the best treatment of the tests, though not a totally accurate or unbiased account. For example, Newsweek states, "But the whole question of applying animal results directly to humans has troubled scientists for years." Yet this is standard operating procedure for testing many foods, drugs and cosmetics, which Newsweek never mentioned. Extensive, careful trials on a wide variety of species of animals has become accepted in the 20th century "as an essential preliminary for screening medical and surgical treatment before employing them on man."[6]

The initial news of the saccharin ban appeared in the Business section of Newsweek, but later articles were in the Science or Medicine

sections. The April 4 article focused on alternatives to saccharin, though also raising some questions about the Canadian tests. The next article, April 25, did little more than report the FDA decision to sell saccharin as a nonprescription drug. It did mention the agency projection that among Americans who consumed one diet soda a day throughout their lives 1,200 extra cases of bladder cancer would occur. The last article, July 4, 1977, detailed a new Canadian study and Senator Edward Kennedy's bill for an 18-month moratorium on a ban. Nothing appeared on the Congressional debate that ensued or the decision to wait 18 months.

The strength of the Newsweek coverage is the "How Good Are the Tests?" article. Otherwise, the risk to humans was minimized and the tests and the FDA conclusions were questioned.

Time

Only one of the Time articles (March 21) appeared in the Medicine section. The two others were in Economy and Business under the subhead of regulation, which might decrease the chances of some persons reading them. The "800 sodas" comparison was mentioned in all three articles.

Time's first article "explained" the Canadian tests in four sentences. It also underplayed the efforts and involvement of the FDA in the tests: "Two days after a scientific delegation from Washington picked up the results of the tests in Ottawa, the FDA and Canadian authorities announced plans to phase out saccharin." Likewise, in the third article (April 25), Sidney Wolfe of the Nader-affiliated Public Citizen's Health Research Group is quoted as saying, "The FDA wrote up its intention in one hour and 20 minutes. The furor could have been avoided if they thought of public reaction. They blew it." Both of these statements are not totally accurate renditions of what happened, as they do not even hint of prior testing and suspicion of the FDA about the safety of saccharin.

The second article focused on protests, industry reactions and actions in Congress, but said nothing of the danger involved. The third article focused on the FDA, with saccharin as the news peg, to look at problems of the FDA and its "success" in banning thalidomide.[7] Again, little information about the tests or the real hazards of saccharin was presented.

Overall, Time did not provide the kind of coverage that explained the human risks involved or that made the FDA appear to know what it was doing in proposing a ban on saccharin. Perhaps assigning a medical or science writer to do a story would have provided coverage that the public needed.

U.S. News and World Report

U.S. News ran two articles and two editorial-interpretive stories on saccharin. One of the articles was a "pro-con" debate between Senator Gaylord Nelson (favoring the ban) and Representative James Martin (against the ban). The article (March 28) explained nothing about the tests, except to say that they "were immediately denounced" by the diet-food industry and the American Diabetes Association.

The April 4 editorial took the approach that the government intends to be "capricious" in "limiting the freedom of choice by individual citizens." Thus people should be told the risks of using saccharin and then decide for themselves whether the risk is worth taking. But the editorial discounts the chances of any real risks, because "since its discovery in 1879, saccharin never has been known to produce cancer in humans."

The second analysis, which appeared June 6, 1977, enhanced the coverage in U.S. News. Here the history of saccharin testing since the 1950s is briefly recounted. The FDA goal of not upsetting consumers in the initial statement is told. In addition, this is the only news magazine that reported Commissioner Kennedy's important statement that even without the Delaney Clause, saccharin would have to be banned under the general safety requirements of the food and drug laws. Though this analysis focuses more on the FDA and its processes than on the risks of using saccharin, it was a good article and the least biased account that appeared in U.S. News.

Intellectual Magazines

No articles from Atlantic, Saturday Review or Harper's were indexed in Reader's Guide during 1977 on saccharin or sugar substitutes.

This seems rather surprising, because both Atlantic and Saturday Review regularly run science-oriented articles, and the latter often has an ecological emphasis in some of its content. In addition, an article in Atlantic won a science writing award in 1975, so one might expect the magazine to use this topic of public outcry as the basis of an in-depth story. Not so.

"Working class" magazines

In 1977, no articles from Reader's Digest on saccharin were indexed in Reader's Guide. This lack was surprising, because it regularly carries science and health articles. In 1963, for example, it contained 48 science articles.[8]

Other periodicals with demographics of the "working class" such as the widely circulated National Enquirer and Star are not indexed or filed in libraries, so they could not be used for this study.

Women's Magazines

Women's magazines are among the most widely circulated in America, according to Ayer's Directory of Publications. Six women's magazines have more than five million circulation in America: Family Circle (8.3 million); Women's Day (8.2 million); Better Homes and Gardens (8 million); McCall's (6.5 million); Ladies' Home Journal (6 million); and Good Housekeeping (5 million). (Others of more than 5 million circulation include Reader's Digest, National Geographic and Modern Maturity.) In addition, Redbook has a circulation of 4.7 million. As a standard of comparison, Time has a circulation of 4.3 million, Newsweek has 3 million, and U.S. News has 2 million circulation.[9]

Just like the previous two categories of magazines, four women's magazines carried no articles on saccharin in 1977. A study comparing the science content of magazines in the middle and late '60s found increased science content in the eight mass circulation magazines studied.[10] Ladies' Home Journal, McCall's and Redbook had more stories falling in the "science" and "medicine" categories than in "space," "nuclear" or "automation" categories. Science articles

dealt mostly with such topics as birth control, explanations of the reproductive cycle, and problems of pregnancy. Other science articles dealt with diet, nutrition and beauty care. Likewise, articles on "medicine" dealt to a great extent with the medical aspects of contraception, reproduction and pediatrics.

Presuming that the overwhelming majority of the audience of women's magazines, even if their readership overlaps, are women, a large proportion of the American public is the audience of these publications. What effect do these magazines have on women's lives? According to sociologist Helena Lopata, the two most frequently cited sources of information used by women 18 to 45 are magazines and friends.[11] If this is the case, then women's magazines have the burden of carrying information necessary to improve and enhance the lives of American women.

Copies of two women's magazines for 1977 were examined page by page to see what references to use of saccharin were embedded in articles.

Ladies' Home Journal runs a monthly column, "Your Family's Health," with short items about medicine and health. Each month from one to three other medicine/health/science stories appeared, ranging from mammography to eye operations and from birth control warnings to arthritis treatments. All issues contained recipes, so those articles specifically on dieting were examined. In February 1977 the new Weight Watcher's diet was included, which has lists of foods allowed and not allowed. Foods with artificial sweeteners are limited to 15 calories a day, thus allowing 15 diet sodas or other combinations of saccharin-sweetened foods. Throughout the year, dieting to lose weight was an important focus of articles in the magazine. In the May issue, three of six recipes used artificial sweetener in an article on Diet Workshop recipes. In November, the "Women Doctor's Diet" recommended using low calorie gelatin, soda and salad dressing. Throughout the year, nothing helped explain the proposed saccharin ban or any reasons for it.

McCall's was also examined from January 1977 through December 1977. Although at least one article appeared in the medicine/health/science category each month (except December), only one small reference to artificial sweeteners appeared. An article in the July 1977 issue

titled "How to Control Your Sweet Tooth," advised:

> The problem (of craving for sweets) has now become even more complicated with the controversy about the sugar-substitute saccharin and the possibility that many of the low-calorie or no-calorie desserts, preserves and soft drinks that so many of us have been using as crutches may disappear, at least temporarily, from the market. (p. 112)

McCall's, which calls itself the "magazine for suburban women," did run articles on various aspects of cancer--mammography, estrogen-cancer links and how different cancers affect different people. In addition, articles on birth defects and how to test for them and two articles on "how to have a healthy baby" appeared. McCall's runs fewer recipes than the Journal. In a dieting article after this time period, in March 1978, the stance taken was that the artificial sweetenersaved on calories, but because sugar had only 18 calories per teaspoon, people's diets would not be harmed by using sugar.

The lack of information on artificial sweetenersis even more appalling after considering the groups who are the highest users of saccharin: women of child-bearing age and boys under age 10. These are also the two groups who take the highest risk in using saccharin: women because the chance of offspring developing bladder cancer is increased, and young boys because the amount of saccharin they consume is proportionally greater as their body size is smaller and because prolonged use of a carcinogen may increase their chances of developing bladder cancer. The magazines that are most likely to be read by the high risk/high use group are most certainly the ones that should carry detailed and comprehensible articles on saccharin. Their collective neglect of the topic is reprehensible.

In conclusion, the reporting of the proposed banning of saccharin and the controversy that surrounded it was much less complete than should be expected in eleven American mass circulation consumer magazines. This was an issue that hit America in its viscera--and the public responded with intense outrage. Magazine coverage did not help the public develop respect for or come to understand how the Canadian tests were done, nor did they explain the danger of saccharin use in terms that made it meaningful or applicable to people's lives. Roland Wolseley wrote in

1969 that the social responsibility of magazines includes the obligation "to provide the people with a fair presentation of facts and with honestly held opinion."[12] If this is the case, these magazines did not fulfill their responsibility to the American public in their reporting of the debate on the banning of saccharin.

FOOTNOTES

1. The discussion in this introductory section is based upon articles in the three major news magazines, which were studied, and network television newscasts, newspaper accounts in the Louisville Courier-Journal and the following magazine articles: R. Jeffrey Smith, "The Media's Sweet Tooth," Columbia Journalism Review, May/June 1977, p. 28-9; "The Great Saccharin Snafu," Consumer Reports, July 1977, p. 410-14; "Saccharin Ban: A Sour Reception," Science News, 111: 182 (March 19, 1977); "Saccharin's Sour Future," Business Week, March 28, 1977, p. 95-7; "Saccharin Can Be Sold--For Now," Business Week, April 25, 1977, p. 38; "Canada's Diet Sodas Lose Their Saccharin," Business Week, October 17, 1977, p. 46.

2. Jerome Ellison and Franklin Cosser, "Non-Fiction Magazine Articles: A Content Analysis," Journalism Quarterly 36:29 (Winter 1959).

3. Hillier Krieghbaum, Science and the Mass Media (New York: New York University Press, 1967), p. 74.

4. Roland E. Wolseley, "The American Periodical Press and Its Impact," Gazette 15:1 (1969) p. 5.

5. Selected for this category on the advice of Lee Young, professor of journalism at the University of Kansas, who teaches a course in magazines in American society. The weekly newspapers National Enquirer and Star would be far more appropriate for this category, but past issues are unavailable in university libraries. Young said that the demographics on Reader's Digest were slightly below middle class, which made it different from the magazines in other categories.

6. Edward C. Lambert, Modern Medical Mistakes (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1978), p. 134.

7. Ibid., p. 160. Lambert argues that the FDA withholding thalidomide from the market was partly action by Dr. Frances Kelsey and also a matter of luck and bureaucratic procrastination.

8. Krieghbaum, loc. cit.

9. Ayer's Directory of Publications (Philadelphia: Ayer Press, 1978).

10. J.S. Sorenson and D.D. Sorenson, "A Comparison of Scientific Content in Magazines in 1964-65 and 1969-70," Journalism Quarterly 50: 1 (Spring 1973), p. 101.

11. Helena Lopata, Occupation: Housewife (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 154.

12. Wolseley, loc. cit.